

# The Profane Aesthetic in Byzantine Art and Literature

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“In the cloisters, under the eyes of the brethren engaged in reading, what business has there that ridiculous monstrosity, that amazing mis-shapen shapeliness and shapely mis-shapeness? . . . Those fierce lions? Those monstrous centaurs? Those semi-human beings? . . . Here you behold several bodies beneath one head; there again several heads upon one body. Here you see a quadruped with the tail of a serpent, there a fish with the head of a quadruped. . . . In fine, on all sides there appears so rich and so amazing a variety of forms that it is more delightful to read the marbles than the manuscripts.” With these famous words the Cistercian leader, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, condemned the imaginative variety of profane art that was to be found in the twelfth-century Cluniac monasteries (Figs. 1, 2).<sup>1</sup> St. Bernard clearly considered this art to be worthless, and yet, equally clearly, he was attracted by its allure. As Erwin Panofsky wrote, “A modern art historian would thank god on his knees for the ability to write so minute, so graphic, and so truly evocatory a description of a decorative ensemble in the ‘Cluniac manner.’”<sup>2</sup>

Partly as a result of St. Bernard’s diatribe, Western medievalists have paid considerable attention to the type of art he describes; indeed, the monstrous forms of the capitals and the initials in the manuscripts have been, for many modern scholars, the defining features of the Romanesque style.<sup>3</sup> But in Byzantium the case is different. There was no St. Bernard to focus our attention on the profane elements in Byzantine art, and so these features have stayed in the margins of our vision. The present-day view of Byzantine art is that it is either religious or political, or both. Only a few scholars have drawn attention to its more subversive elements.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Trans. E. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, 2d. ed. (Princeton, N.J., 1979), 25.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, M. Schapiro, *Romanesque Art* (New York, 1977), esp. 4–10.

<sup>4</sup>Most notably, A. Cutler, “On Byzantine Boxes,” *JWalt* 42–43 (1984–85): 32–47. See also the new publication A. Iacobini and E. Zanini, eds., *Arte profana e arte sacra a Bisanzio* (Rome, 1995).

The following article attempts to define the profane aesthetic in Byzantine art. Since the topic is a large one, there is space to consider only three of its most important aspects: first, innovation in art; second, unbridled movement; and, finally, nudity. Another restriction that I place upon myself is the concentration, by and large, on Byzantine art in the middle period, that is, from the ninth to the twelfth century (although it is necessary to range rather wider in the texts).

### I. INNOVATION

The discussion thus begins with innovation. It was, of course, axiomatic in Byzantium that orthodox Christian artists did not invent. The very legitimacy of the holy image depended upon its adherence to tradition and its supposed accuracy in reproducing the prototype.<sup>5</sup> It was their lack of invention that distinguished Christian images from the fanciful and arbitrary creations of the pagans. In 787, the council of Nicaea quoted from a seventh-century dialogue on this subject, written by John of Thessalonike. In this exchange, which takes place between a Christian and a pagan, the Christian says, “We . . . make images of men who have existed and have had bodies—the holy servants of God—so that we may remember them and reverence them, and we do nothing incongruous in depicting them such as they have been. We do not invent anything as you [pagans] do.”<sup>6</sup>

A later passage, from the first *Antirrhetic* by the early-ninth-century iconodule Patriarch Nikephoros, specifies what these “incongruous” inventions of the pagans were: “The idol is a fiction of those things that *do not exist* and have no being in themselves. Of such a kind are the shapes that the pagans fatuously and irreligiously invent, such as of tritons, centaurs, and other phantoms that do not exist.”<sup>7</sup>

Byzantine secular writings also characterized such composite creatures derived from pagan mythology as implausible or absurd. In the twelfth-century Byzantine satire, the *Timarion*, the protagonist says that the unlikely event of his release from hell is “as unrealistic as the things sculptors and painters create . . . , hippocentaurs, sphinxes, and all the other mythological fabrications of the ancients.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the tenth-century Life of Basil the First speaks scornfully of the centaur Chiron, saying that the future emperor was educated by his father for, unlike Achilles, he had no need of a semihuman tutor.<sup>9</sup> In the eleventh century, Psellos, in an allegorical treatise on the sphinx, treats the creature as pure fantasy, although without condemning it. He says that the sphinx has the form of a

<sup>5</sup>L. Brubaker, “Byzantine Art in the Ninth Century: Theory, Practice and Culture,” *BMGS* 13 (1989): 23–93, esp. 48–49. On the general problem of innovation in Byzantium, see A. R. Littlewood, ed., *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>Καὶ οὐδὲν ἀπεικὸς ἐργαζόμεθα γράφοντες τουτοὺς, οἷοι καὶ γεγονόσιν. Οὐδὲ γὰρ πλαττόμεθα καθ’ ὑμᾶς . . . Mansi 13:165; trans. C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453* (Toronto, 1986), 140.

<sup>7</sup>Τὸ δὲ εἰδωλὸν ἀνυπάρκτων τινῶν καὶ ἀνυποστάτων ἀνάπλασμα, ὁποίας δὴ τινες Ἕλληνες ὑπ’ ἀσυνεσίας καὶ ἀθεΐας, Τριτώνων τινῶν καὶ Κενταύρων καὶ ἄλλων φασμάτων οὐχ ὕφειστών, μορφὰς ἀναπλάττουσι. *Antirrheticus* 1.29, PG 100:277B. See K. Parry, “Theodore Studites and the Patriarch Nicephoros on Image-Making as a Christian Imperative,” *Byzantion* 59 (1989): 164–83, esp. 180.

<sup>8</sup>“Τὰ μὲν οὖν ὅσα νῦν φῆς,” ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, “κομψότατε, ἅπιστα πρὸ τοῦ γενέσθαι ὄντα, τεράστια μοι δοκοῦσι καὶ ἀληθῶς αἰνίγματα, ὅποια λιθοξόοι καὶ ζωγράφοι ἐν οἰκίαις πλαττοῦσιν, ἵπποκενταύρους δηλαδὴ καὶ σφίγγας καὶ εἴ τι ἄλλο μυθῶδες τοῖς παλαιοῖς ἀνεστήλωτο.” *Timarion* 27, ed. R. Romano (Naples, 1974), 74.674–78; trans. B. Baldwin, *Timarion* (Detroit, Mich., 1984), 60.

<sup>9</sup>*Vita Basilii* 6, PG 109:236A.

beautiful maiden as far as the navel, but its lower parts are covered with thick hair and have the feet of a wild beast and a long tail; nevertheless, its voice speaks atticizing Greek. Such is the monster of the myth, declares Psellos, and let license be given to the poets to create whatever they like; but as for him, he is concerned not with the appearance of the monster but with its symbolism. He goes on to explain that the sphinx represents man, who is composed of both rational and irrational natures.<sup>10</sup>

The invention of composite monsters by pagan artists was seen in more negative terms by the Byzantine saints' Lives. The Life of St. Andrew the Fool has a story about the saint standing in front of the great bronze doors of the Senate House and looking at its reliefs, which portrayed the battle of the giants against the gods. These reliefs may be reflected in a miniature from a tenth-century copy of the *Theriaka* of Nikander, where one sees the legs of the giants represented in the usual classical manner, as writhing snakes (Fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> As St. Andrew was gazing at the giants on the Senate House doors—the text calls them “thong-legs”—a passerby saw him and gave him a slap on the neck, saying, “You idiot, what are you staring at?” The saint answered back, “You fool in your spirit! I am looking at the visible idols, but you are a spiritual ‘thong-leg,’ and a serpent, and of the viper’s brood, for your soul’s axles and your heart’s spiritual legs are crooked and going to Hades.”<sup>12</sup>

For St. Andrew, then, the snake-legged giants were not only idols but also symbols of evil. Another type of composite creature is recorded in the Lives and encomia of the stylite St. Alypius. Here we read of a monstrous stone statue of a *tauroleon*, a combination of a lion and a bull, which the saint found sitting on top of a column in a pagan cemetery that was deserted by all except demons. Showing considerable acrobatic prowess, St. Alypius scaled the column and prized this reasonless creature off its pedestal with a crowbar; he then replaced it with an image that was true, namely, an icon of Christ. He did this, we are told, so that the enemy army of demons might be laughed at and made fun of.<sup>13</sup>

The god Pan, half human and half goat, was singled out for special censure by Byzantine writers. Another encomium of St. Alypius, written by a certain Antony of St. Sophia, perhaps in the tenth century, describes how the noble man, acquiring the feet of a deer, mounted the column by leaps and bounds until finally he reached its top and threw down the complex and beautifully worked sculpture of a lion and an ox that had stood there. The saint, says the encomium, made *himself* into a living statue on top of the column. Now the column was no longer serving as a pedestal for a mute sculpture of a

<sup>10</sup>J. M. Duffy and D. J. O'Meara, eds., *Michaelis Pselli Philosophica minora* (Stuttgart-Leipzig, 1992), 1:158.15–26.

<sup>11</sup>Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris suppl. gr. 247, fol. 47. See H. Omont, *Miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale du VI<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1929), 40, pl. 68; *Byzance: L'art byzantin dans les collections publiques françaises*, exhibition catalogue, Musée du Louvre (Paris, 1992), 349, no. 259.

<sup>12</sup>“Σαλέ, τί ἴστασαι βλέπων;” Ὁ δὲ μακάριος ἔφη πρὸς αὐτόν· “Ἐξηχε τῷ νοῦ, τῶν εἰδῶλων τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ἐντρανίζων ἔστηκα, καὶ γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς νοητὸς λωρόπους καθέστηκας καὶ ὄφις καὶ γέννημα ἐχιδνῶν· οἱ γὰρ ἄξονες τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ τὰ νοητὰ διαβήματα τῆς καρδίας σου διεστραμμένα εἰσὶ καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν ἄδην βαδίζοντα.” Ed. and trans. L. Rydén, *The Life of St. Andrew the Fool* (Uppsala, 1995), 2:140.1924–28.

<sup>13</sup>H. Delehaye, *Les saints stylites*, SubsHag 14 (Brussels, 1923), 154.1–26 (*vita prior*); cf. *ibid.*, 190.10–17 (encomium by St. Neophytos). On this episode, see H. Saradi-Mendelovici, “Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and Their Legacy in Later Byzantine Centuries,” *DOP* 44 (1990): 47–61, esp. 55.

pagan god, such as Sarapis, Dionysos, or Apollo. Nor—far from it—did the column bear Pan, who, says the writer, was “the most ludicrously laughable of the lot—a mixture of different natures and faculties.” Rather, the column now carried the saint himself, a divinely shaped image, an icon of piety, and a statue with reason.<sup>14</sup>

Tritons, centaurs, hippocentaurs, sphinxes, snake-legged giants, bull-lions, and the goat-shanked Pan—all of these pagan inventions were given negative connotations by Byzantine writers.<sup>15</sup> Were such monsters avoided, then, in Byzantine art? Not one bit of it; they were portrayed frequently and with relish by Byzantine artists—and not only in secular contexts, but on churches and in religious manuscripts as well. Even the goat-footed Pan, or his relatives, found a place in Byzantine art, as did other composites drawn from mythology, such as sirens. A small selection of such images is considered presently, drawn first from secular contexts and then from church art.

One can start with a tenth- or eleventh-century casket covered with plaques of bone and ivory, housed in the collection at Dumbarton Oaks. On the lid one finds several interesting inventions, including a satyr provided with a long tail and goat’s hooves and legs (Fig. 4, center).<sup>16</sup> There is also a bird with a human head, which one would call a siren, were it not for the dog’s head that grows out of the back of the human head (Fig. 5).<sup>17</sup> In the fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the *Alexander Romance*, now in Venice, the kynokephaloi are shown in this way, with their dogs’ heads growing from the backs of their human heads (Fig. 6, upper right).<sup>18</sup> The strange creature on the casket is thus really a mixture of a siren and a kynokephalos, a composite of two composites. Finally, one may note the appearance of a composite creature derived from Persia, with the foreparts of a winged lion and the tail of a peacock (Fig. 7, second from the right).<sup>19</sup> This animal had entered the repertoire of Byzantine silk design from Iran; it can be seen woven into a Byzantine silk from the Musées d’Art et d’Histoire in Brussels (Fig. 8).<sup>20</sup>

The next example is a rosette casket decorated with plaques depicting a marine thiasos, housed in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. Here one finds boys riding hippocamps, animals that have a good pedigree in antique art. But there are also some less authentically classical creatures, such as dolphins whose twisted tails turn into the heads of beasts, which are inventions of both the land and the sea (Fig. 9, lower left).<sup>21</sup>

The final example of the rosette casket is provided by the Musée de Cluny in Paris (here I am giving only a small selection from the rich variety of images provided by these

<sup>14</sup>Οὐδὲ πολλοῦ γε καὶ δεῖ Πᾶνα τὸν τῶν προειρημένων εἰς γέλωτος ἀφορμὴν γελοιότατον, μίγμα διαφόρων φύσεων καὶ δυνάμεων . . . Ed. F. Halkin, *Inédits byzantins d’Ochrida, Candie et Moscou*, SubsHag 38 (Brussels, 1963), 189.7–191.60.

<sup>15</sup>The only composite creature from ancient art that escaped censure was the griffin, which was accepted because many Byzantines considered it to be not an invention of human artists, but an authentic work of the creator. It was praised, for example, by George of Pisidia in his *Hexaemeron*, PG 92:1505A.

<sup>16</sup>K. Weitzmann, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 3, *Ivories and Steatites* (Washington, D.C., 1972), 54, pl. 30c.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 53, pl. 31E.

<sup>18</sup>Fol. 107; A. Xyngopoulos, *Les miniatures du Roman d’Alexandre le Grand dans le codex de l’Institut Hellénique de Venise* (Athens, 1965), 122, fig. 129.

<sup>19</sup>Weitzmann, *Ivories and Steatites*, 54, pl. 31c.

<sup>20</sup>O. von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei* (Berlin, 1913), 2:11, fig. 236.

<sup>21</sup>A. Goldschmidt and K. Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1930), 1:38–39, no. 40, pl. 22c.





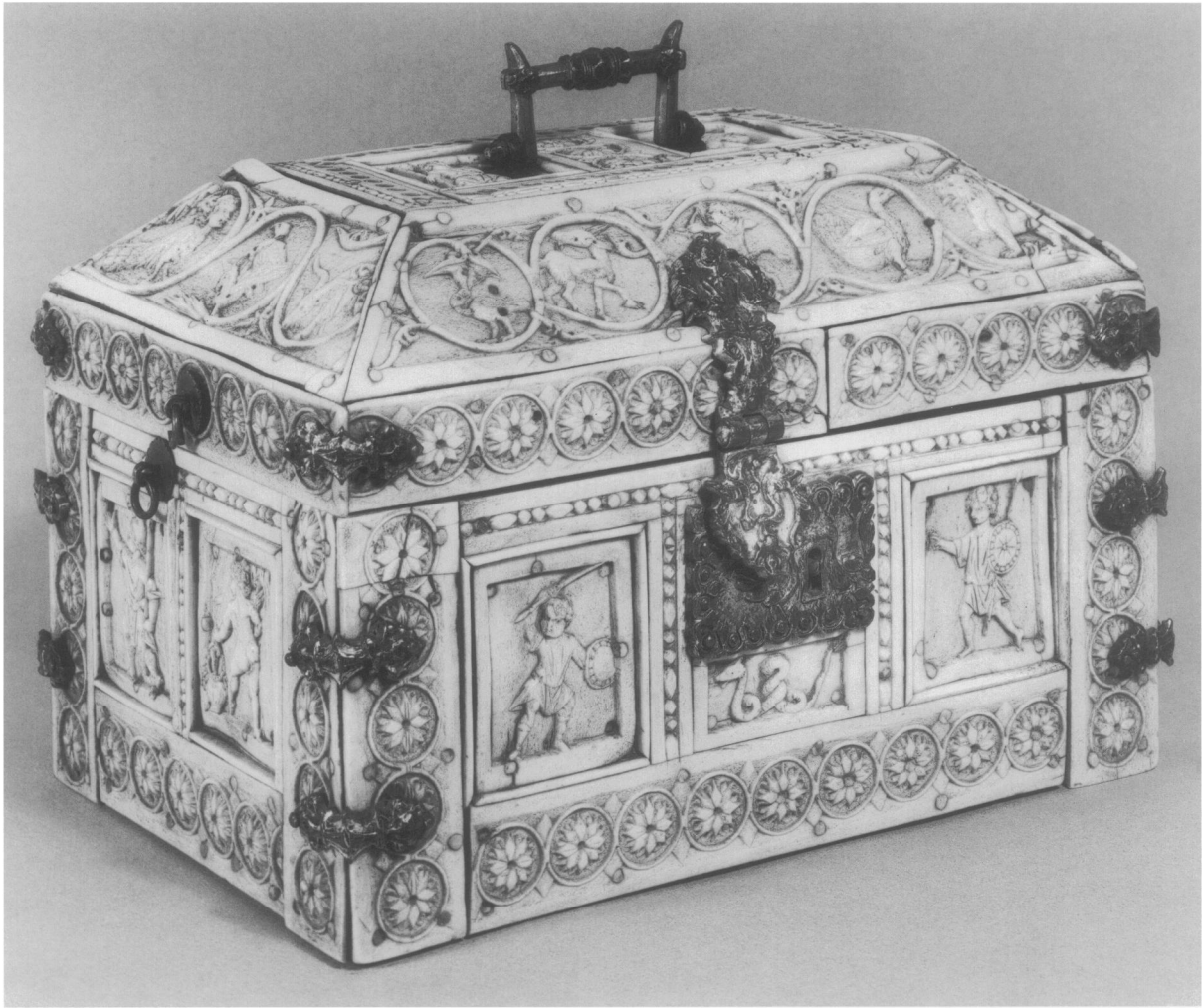
1 Lions with two bodies, capital, cloister of St.-Pierre, Moissac



2 "Quadruped with the tail of a serpent," capital, cloister of St.-Pierre, Moissac



3 Giants, *Theriaka* of Nikander, Bibliothèque Nationale suppl. gr. 247, fol. 47, Paris  
(photo: courtesy of the library)



4 Casket, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



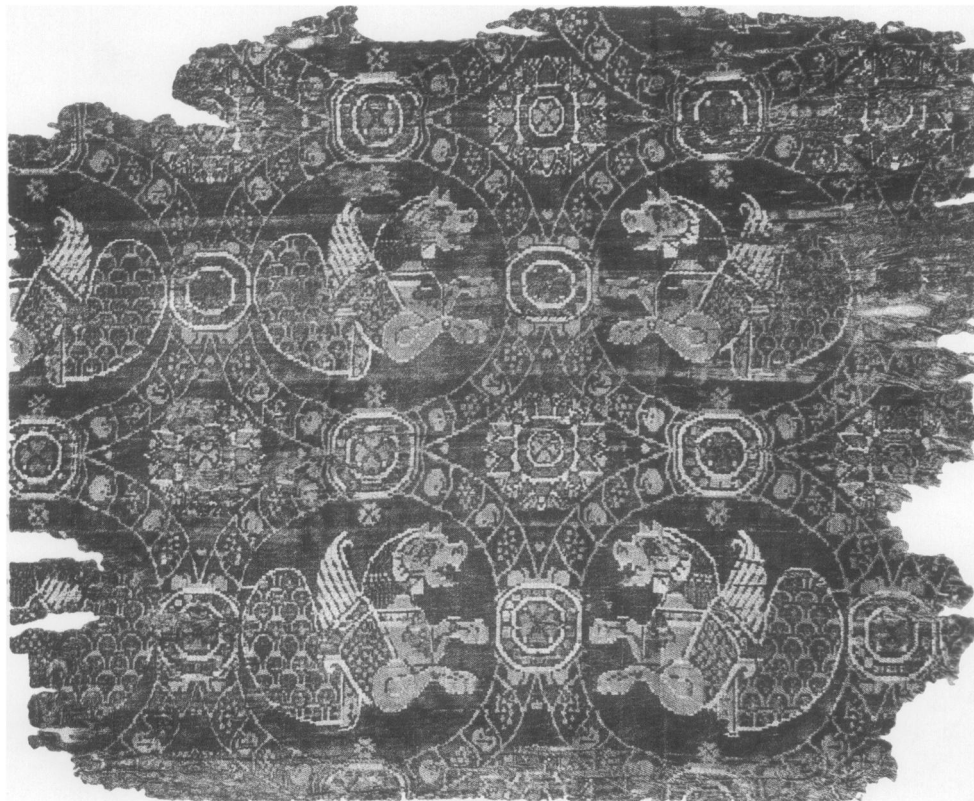
5 Bird with human and canine heads, casket, detail of the lid, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



6 Alexander and the kynokephaloi, *Alexander Romance*, fol. 107, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, Venice (after A. Xyngopoulos, *Les miniatures du Roman d'Alexandre le Grand dans le codex de l'Institut Hellénique de Venise* [Athens, 1965], fig. 129)



7 Casket, back of the lid, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

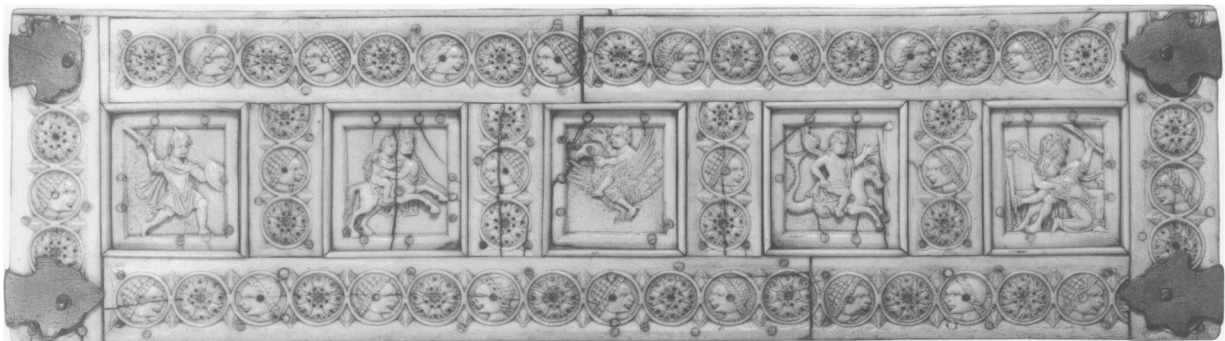


8 Silk, Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels (after O. von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei* [Berlin, 1913], 2: fig. 236)





9 Casket, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (photo: courtesy of the gallery)



10 Casket, Musée de Cluny, Paris (photo: courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux)



11 St. Theodore Tiron, silver bowl, detail of interior, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (after A. Bank, *Byzantine Art in the Collections of the USSR* [Leningrad-Moscow, 1966], fig. 206)



12 Silver bowl, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (after Bank, *Byzantine Art in Collections*, fig. 205)



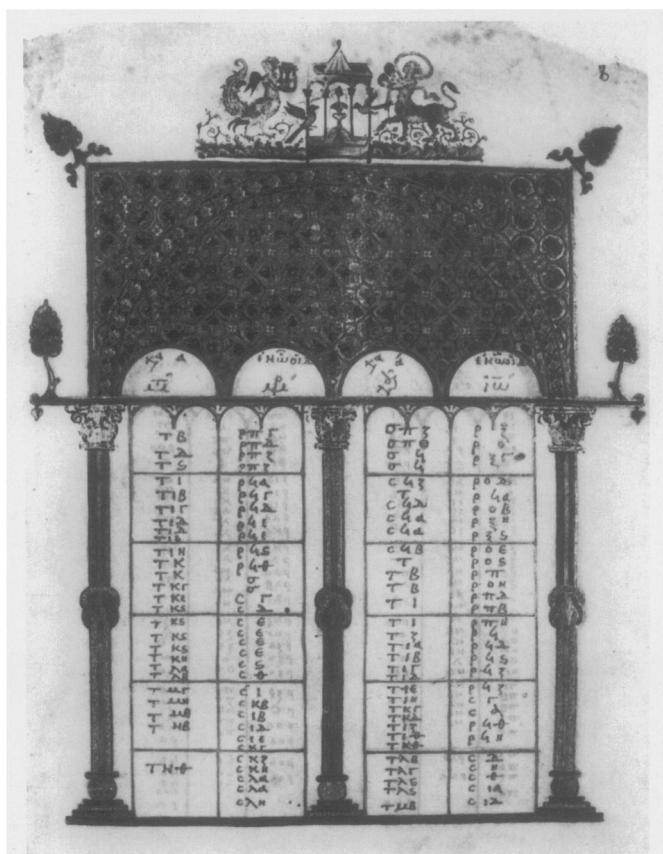
13 Siren and water bird, ceramic bowl, Archaeological Museum, Corinth



14 Centaur, ceramic bowl, Archaeological Museum, Corinth (after C. H. Morgan, *The Byzantine Pottery*, vol. 11 of *Corinth: Results of Excavations Conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* [Cambridge, Mass., 1942], pl. 27a)



- 15 Sphinxes, Panaghia  
Gorgoeipikoos (Little Metropolis),  
detail of the west facade, Athens



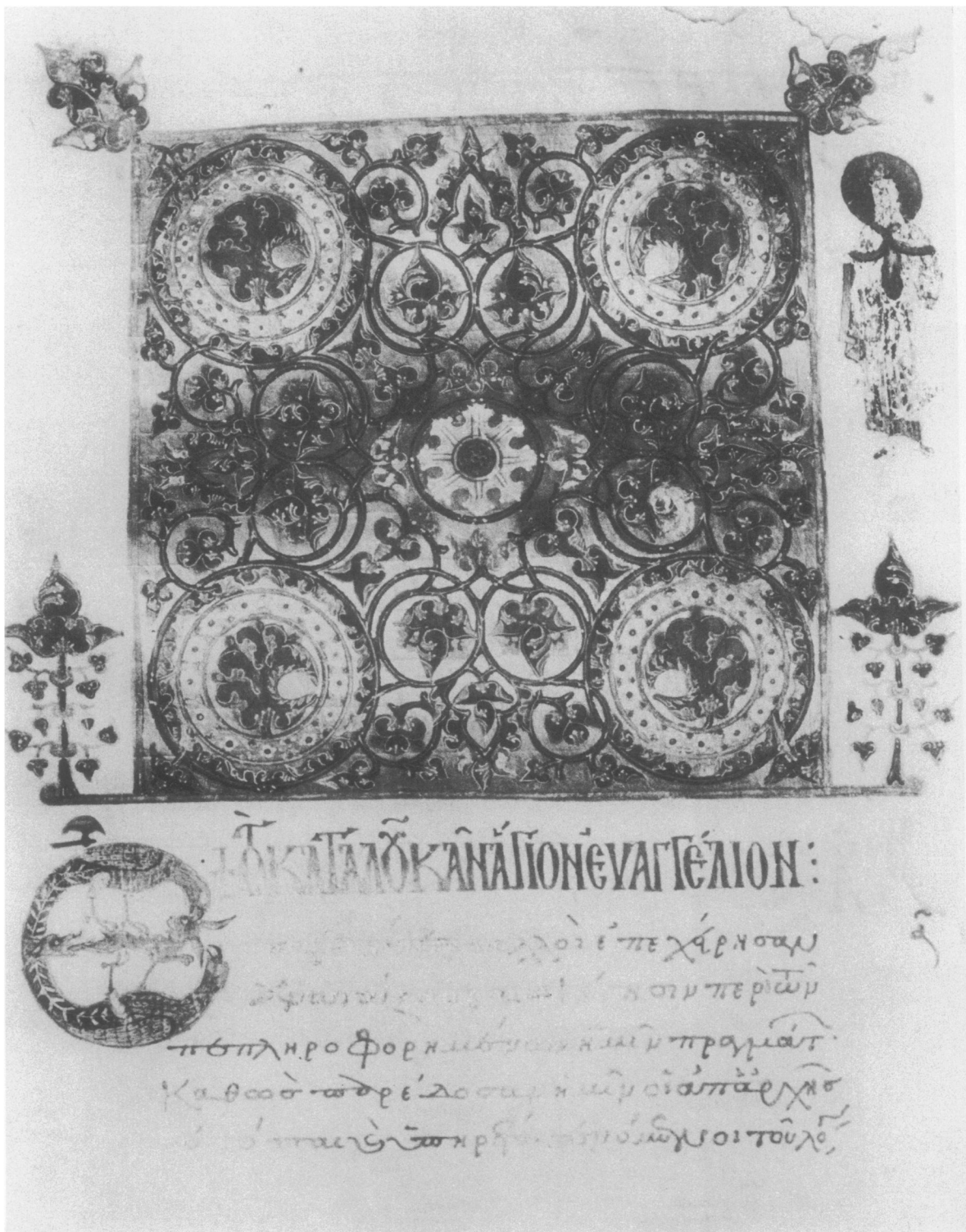
- 16 Canon tables with musical  
inventions, Gospel Book, Biblioteca  
Palatina 5, fol. 5, Parma (after P.  
Eleuteri, *I manoscritti greci della  
Biblioteca Palatina di Parma* [Milan,  
1993], pl. 1)



17 "Centaur" with a lute, Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, Sinai 339, fol. 344v, St. Catherine's monastery, Mt. Sinai (photo: courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai)



18 Monk Theophanes with the Virgin, Gospel Book, Felton 710/5, fol. 1v, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (after H. Buchthal, *An Illuminated Byzantine Gospel Book*, Special Bulletin of the National Gallery of Victoria [Melbourne, 1961], cover)



19 Opening of St. Luke's Gospel, Gospel Book, Felton 710/5, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (after Buchthal, *Illuminated Byzantine Gospel Book*, fig. 7)

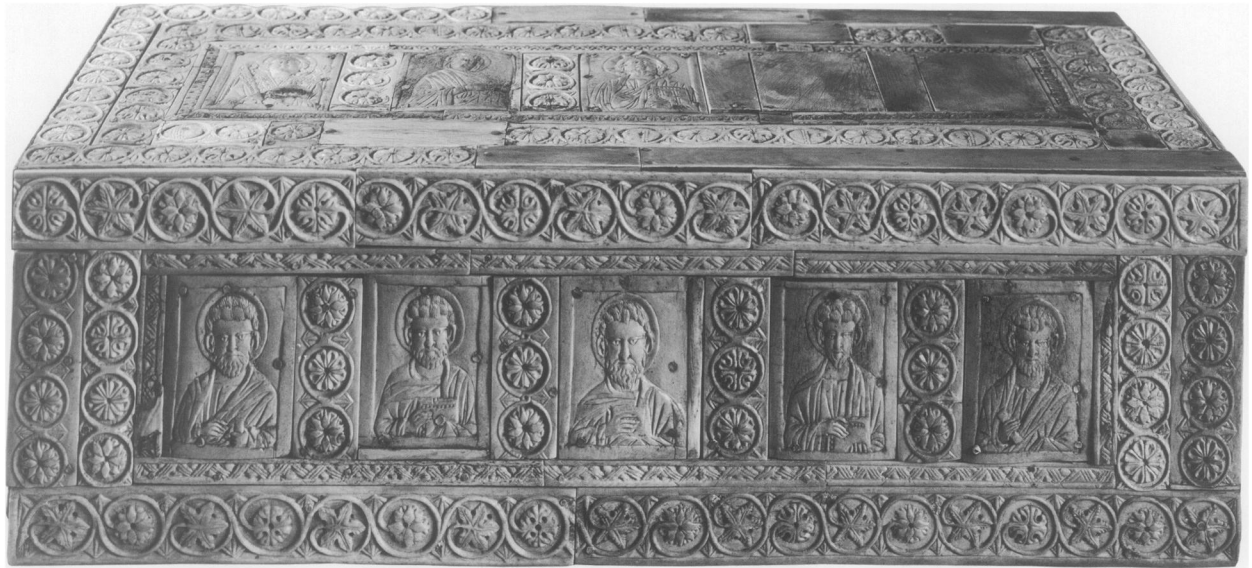


20 Lion with one head and four bodies, marble roundel on the north facade, San Marco, Venice (photo: Osvaldo Böhm)

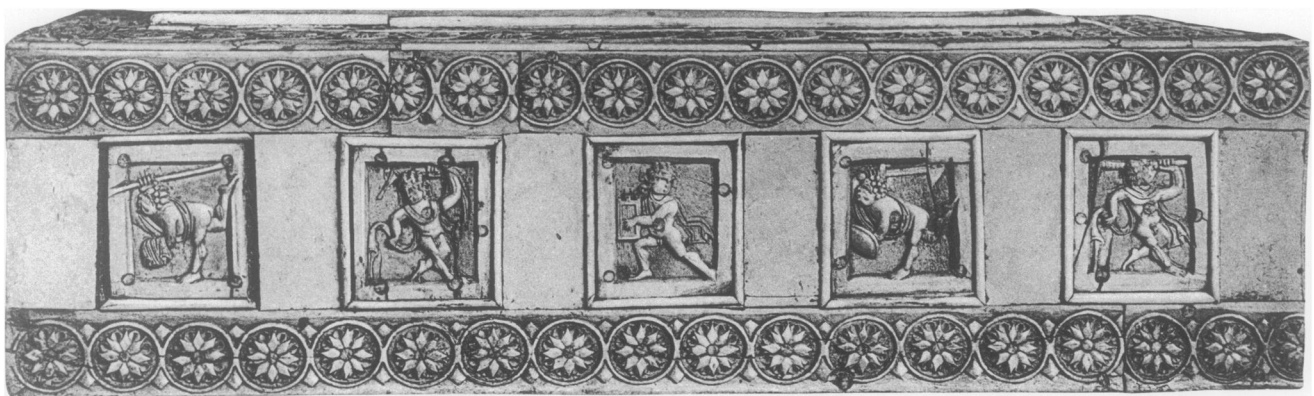


21 Initial Q with four-bodied lion, Bibliothèque Municipale 36, fol. 124, Boulogne-sur-Mer (after Z. Świechowski and A. Rizzi, *Romanische Reliefs von venezianischen Fassaden* [Wiesbaden, 1982], fig. 13)

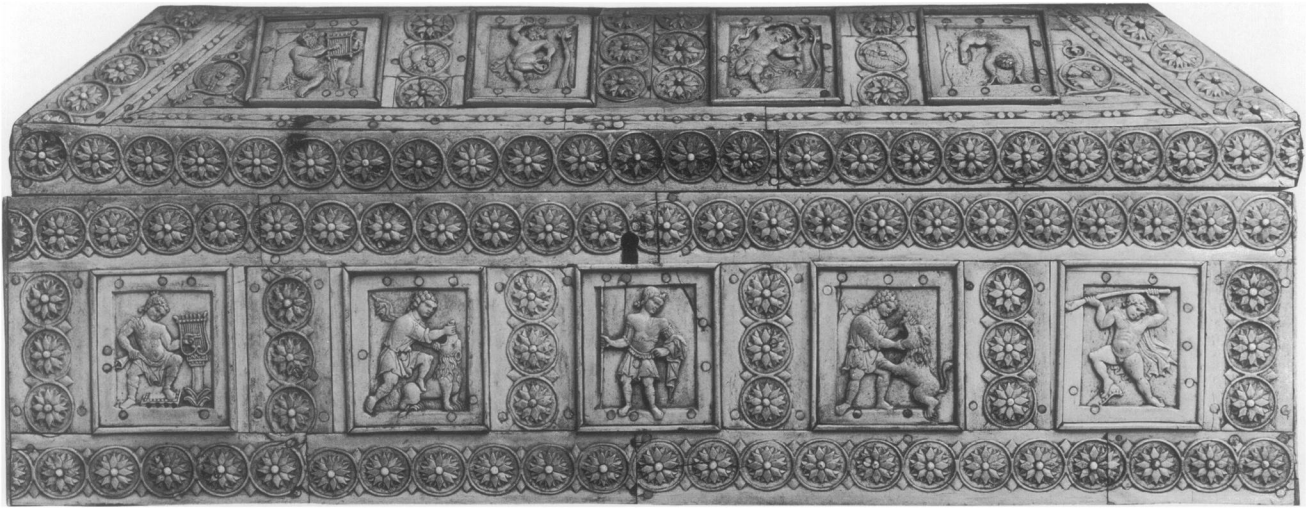




22 Deesis with apostles and saints, casket, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



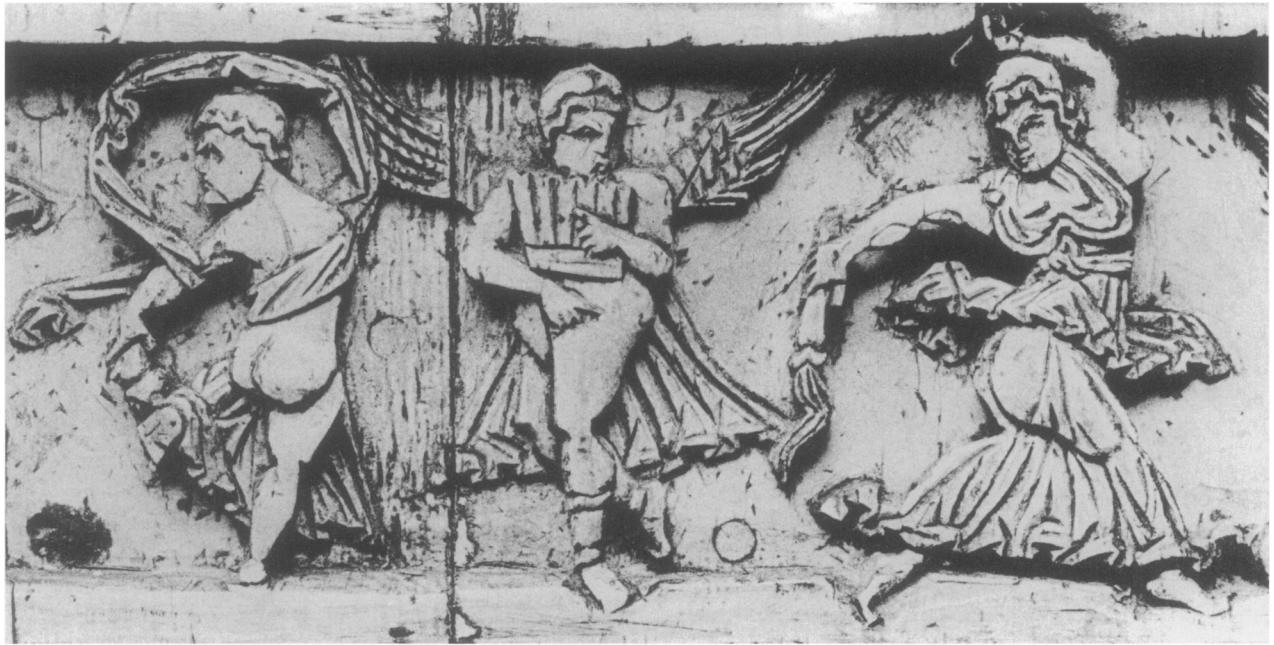
23 Figures in motion, casket, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (after A. Goldschmidt and K. Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.-XIII. Jahrhunderts* [Berlin, 1930], 1: pl. 32)



24 Figures in motion, casket, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence (photo: courtesy of Giraudon/Art Resource, New York)



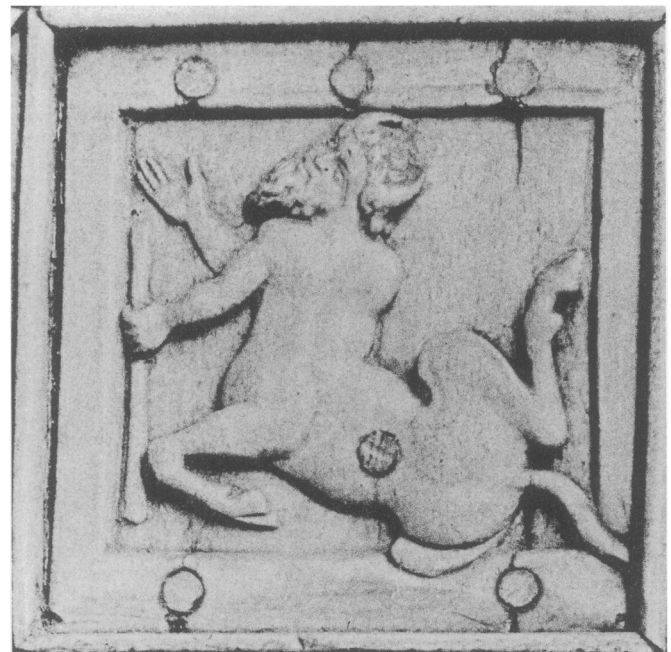
25 Dionysos, Veroli casket, detail, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (photo: courtesy of the museum)



26 Maenads, plaque from a casket, Archaeological Museum, Pula (after Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1: pl. 15b)



27 Drunken Herakles, plaque from a casket, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (photo: courtesy of the museum)



28 Centaur, casket, detail, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence (after Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1: pl. 20c)





29 Playing cupids and centaurs, casket, lid, Musée du Louvre, Paris (photo: courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux)



30 Bear on a leash, bilateral stone relief, Archaeological Museum, Istanbul (after A. Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines du moyen âge*, vol. 2, *XIe–XIVe siècle* [Paris, 1976], pl. 3a)



31 Armed kynokephalos, bilateral stone relief, Archaeological Museum, Istanbul (after Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines*, pl. 3b)



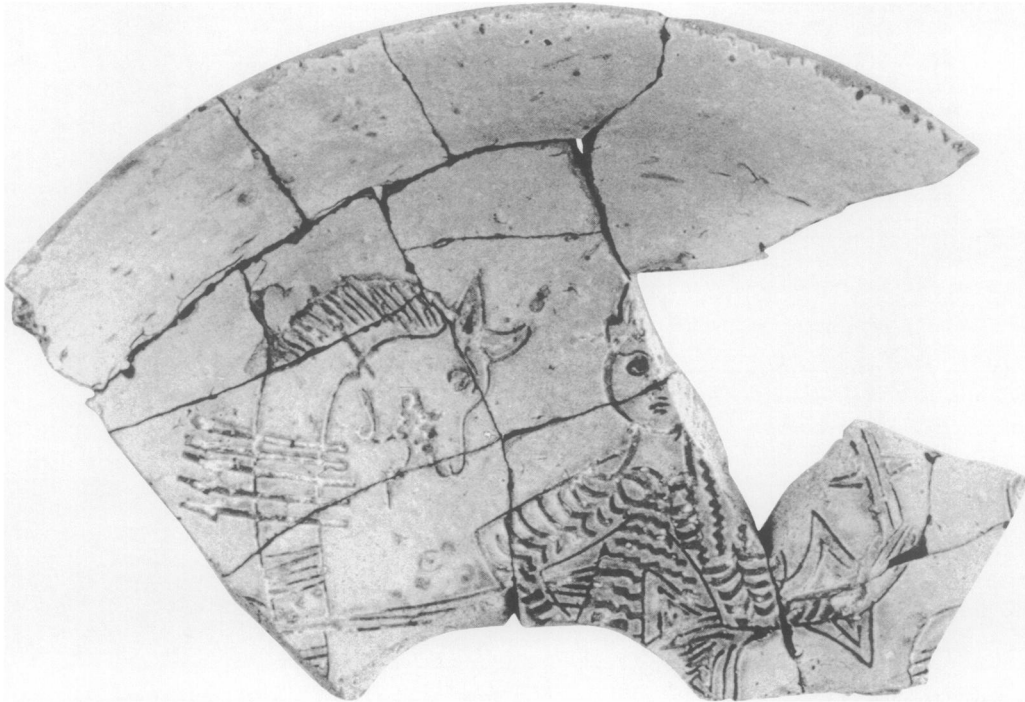
32 Naked warrior, casket, detail of the back, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



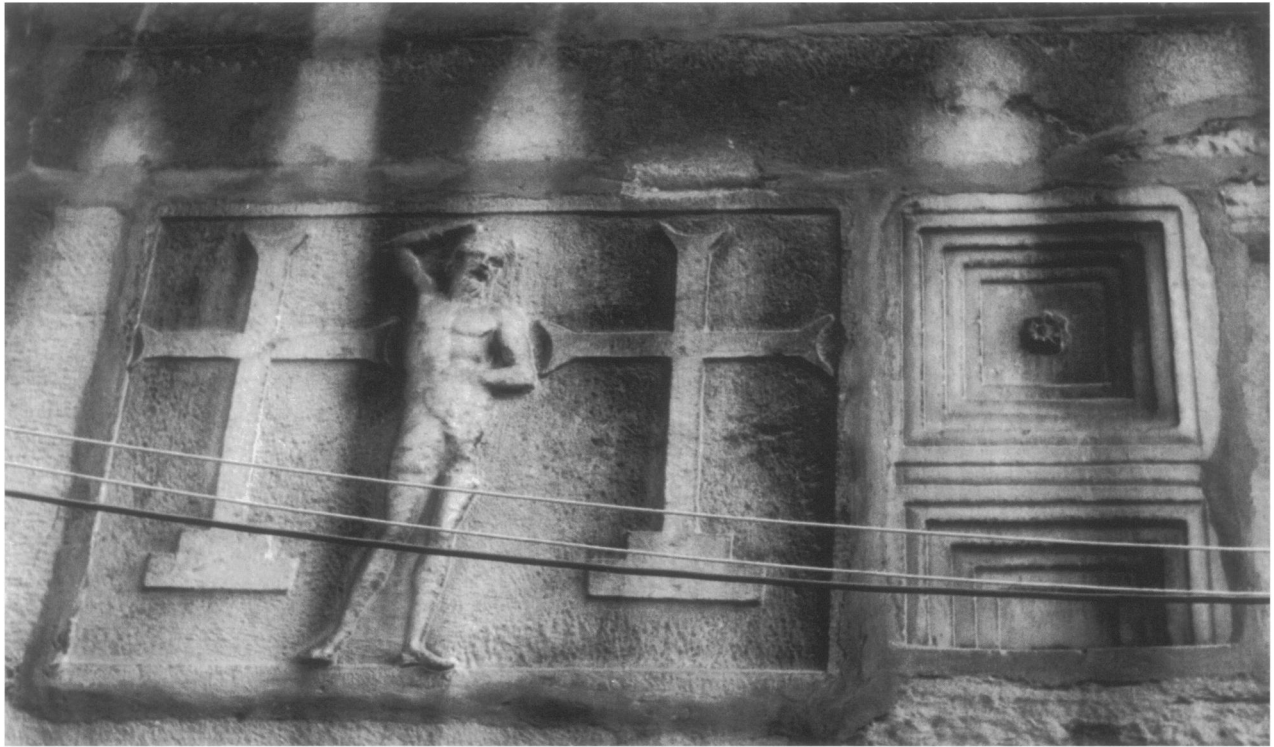
33 Naked warrior, casket, detail, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (photo: courtesy of the museum)



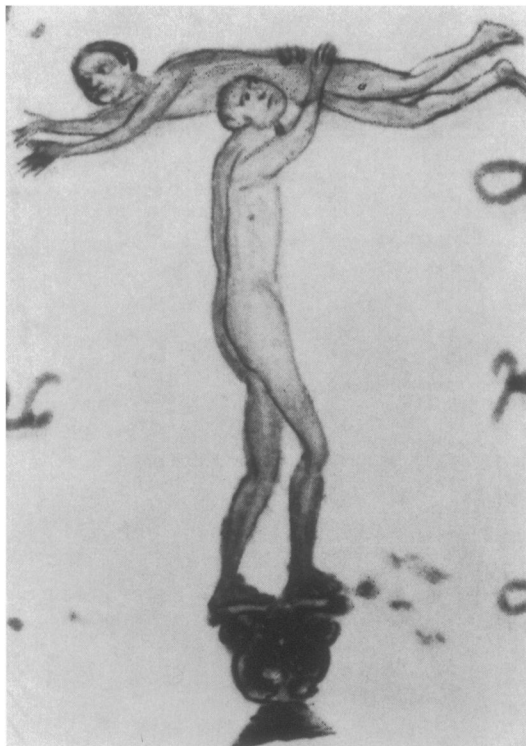
34 Naked dragon slayer, ceramic bowl, excavated at Thebes



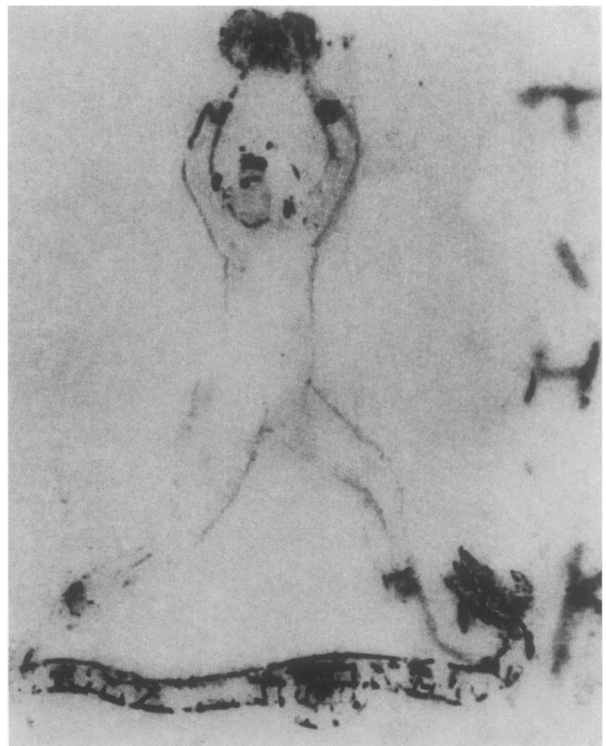
35 Digenes Akritas slaying the dragon, ceramic bowl, excavated in the Athenian agora (after M. A. Frantz, "Akritas and the Dragons," *Hesperia* 10.1 [1941]: fig. 1)



36 Pagan relief with added crosses, Panaghia Gorgoepikoos (Little Metropolis), detail of the north wall, Athens



37 Naked acrobats, Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, University Library, C.I.6, Turin (after A. Grabar, "Une pyxide en ivoire à Dumbarton Oaks," *DOP* 14 [1960]: pl. 35c)



38 Naked performer, Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, University Library, C.I.6, fol. 67, Turin (after G. Galavaris, *The Illustrations of the Liturgical Homilies of Gregory Nazianzenus* [Princeton, N.J., 1969], fig. 50)

boxes). On the back of this casket one finds a centaur with his arms around a boy who is riding on his back—these are probably Chiron and Achilles. We also see another hippocamp, this time being ridden by a winged Eros (Fig. 10, second and fourth panels from the left).<sup>22</sup>

A somewhat similar repertoire of composite creatures may be found on Byzantine tableware, both metal bowls and their down-market imitations in pottery. A silver bowl from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, which may date to the eleventh century, has a single Christian image on its inside—a relief icon of St. Theodore Tiron (Fig. 11). On the outside of the bowl, an inscription is engraved upon the rim: “Lord help your servant Theodore Tourkeles.” Beneath this invocation there is a zoo of fearsome beasts, including several man-eaters, as well as sphinxes with lions’ bodies and human heads (Fig. 12).<sup>23</sup>

From the many examples in pottery, I illustrate a twelfth-century engraved slipware bowl found at Corinth, which is decorated with a siren seizing a large water bird, presumably in order to carry it off as prey (Fig. 13).<sup>24</sup> Another bowl from Corinth depicts a centaur in the classical manner, bearded and with horse’s hooves (Fig. 14).<sup>25</sup>

In ecclesiastical art, sculptures of mixed creatures appeared on the outside of churches. The late-twelfth-century church of the Little Metropolis in Athens presents the best-known gallery of inventions, such as the relief on the facade showing four sphinxes, two with wings and two without (Fig. 15).<sup>26</sup>

Ecclesiastical manuscripts, such as the canon tables from a Gospel Book in Parma, Biblioteca Palatina 5, contain some of the most engaging inventions in Byzantine art. Here, at the top, a siren and a centaurlike creature engage in a duet beside a fountain set in a garden, with the siren playing a harp, and the centaur—actually half man and half leopard—clashing a pair of cymbals (Fig. 16).<sup>27</sup> In another manuscript, a winged centaur may be seen playing a lute; this initial decorates a twelfth-century copy of the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, commissioned by the abbot of the Pantokrator monastery in Constantinople, Joseph Hagioglykerites (Fig. 17).<sup>28</sup>

Manuscripts containing such motifs were both commissioned and painted by monks. This is demonstrated by an illuminated Gospel Book of the twelfth century, now in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. The frontispiece miniature of this book shows a structure with a double arcade framing both the donor, a monk standing on the left, and the recipient, the Virgin holding the blessing Christ child on her left arm (Fig. 18).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 39–40, no. 41, pl. 23c; K. Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology in Byzantine Art* (Princeton, N.J., 1951), 165–66, fig. 205.

<sup>23</sup>A. Bank, *Byzantine Art in the Collections of the USSR* (Leningrad-Moscow, 1966), 368, figs. 205–7.

<sup>24</sup>C. H. Morgan, *The Byzantine Pottery*, vol. 11 of *Corinth: Results of Excavations Conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* (Cambridge, Mass., 1942), 94, 239, no. 668, fig. 70; H. C. Evans and W. D. Wixom, eds., *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261*, exhibition catalogue, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1997), 267–68, no. 189.

<sup>25</sup>Morgan, *Byzantine Pottery*, 237, no. 651, pl. 27a.

<sup>26</sup>A. Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines du moyen âge*, vol. 2, *XIe–XIVe siècle* (Paris, 1976), 96–99, pl. 69b.

<sup>27</sup>Gospel book, Biblioteca Palatina 5, fol. 5; P. Eleuteri, *I manoscritti greci della Biblioteca Palatina di Parma* (Milan, 1993), 3–13, pl. 1.

<sup>28</sup>Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, Sinai 339, fol. 344v; K. Weitzmann and G. Galavaris, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Illuminated Greek Manuscripts*, vol. 1, *From the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1990), 140–53, pl. 161, fig. 569.



Fitted neatly on either side of the triangular roof are four dodecasyllable verses, which read as follows:

O queen of all, as Mother of God the Logos,  
Theophanes is the donor and the scribe of this book,  
as well as the executor of the ornaments it contains,  
Theophanes your Nazarite servant.

Thus, the poem specifies that the monk Theophanes was not only the donor of the book, but also the writer and the artist who executed the painted ornaments.<sup>29</sup> When one looks at these ornaments, one finds that they include some inventions, such as the epsilon that serves as an initial to St. Luke's Gospel: it is composed of an unfortunate hare being devoured by two falcons and also, on the left, by the disembodied head of a fox that appears to grow out of the birds' tails (Fig. 19).<sup>30</sup> Certainly, there is a striking contrast between the austere self-image of the monk, as he presents himself in the company of Christ and the Virgin on the dedication page, and the relative frivolity of his ornaments inside.

Obviously, then, the Byzantines liked looking at these composite creatures, whatever the official view of their church was on such creations. Do we, then, find any reflections of this appreciation in their literature, that is, a positive as opposed to a negative evaluation of innovative and unnatural forms in art? The Byzantines did indeed express such an appreciation, and it is where one might expect to find it—not in church writings, but in learned descriptions of classical monuments and in the secular romances. I cite three examples.

The first example comes from the long poem written by Constantine the Rhodian in the tenth century and describing the church of the Holy Apostles and its mosaics. Constantine prefaces his *ekphrasis* of the church with an account of the Seven Wonders of Constantinople, among them the marvels of the Senate House at the Forum of Constantine (the third wonder). Here he describes at some length the bronze doors with their reliefs of the battle between the gods and the giants—the same reliefs that were criticized by Andrew the Fool. Constantine's description of the snake-legged giants is vivid: "The giants [are shown] with their feet turned inwards and coiled underneath them like serpents . . . and the snakes, as if with flickering tongues, bellow terribly. They are grim to look at, and their eyes flash fire, so that those who gaze at them are in fright and trembling, and their hearts are filled with horror and fear." Immediately after this dramatic description, Constantine makes a disclaimer: "With such errors was the stupid race

<sup>29</sup> Ἀνασσα πάντων ὡς θεοῦ μήτηρ λόγου  
δοτὴρ κατ' αὐτὸ καὶ γραφεὺς τῆς πυξίδος  
καὶ τῶν κατ' αὐτὴν ἐργάτης ποικιλιμάτων  
σὸς ναζιραῖος οἰκέτης Θεοφάνης.

H. Buchthal, *An Illuminated Byzantine Gospel Book*, Special Bulletin of the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne, 1961), 1. The identification of Theophanes as scribe and painter was questioned by R. S. Nelson, "Theoktistos and Associates in Twelfth-Century Constantinople: An Illustrated New Testament of A.D. 1133," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 15 (1987): 53–78, esp. 63–64, but reaffirmed by I. Hutter, "Decorative Systems in Byzantine Manuscripts and the Scribe as Artist: Evidence from Manuscripts in Oxford," *Word and Image* 12.1 (1996): 4–22, esp. 5–6 and nn. 24, 32. The careful distinction of Theophanes' three roles suggests that we should take his statement at face value.

<sup>30</sup> Buchthal, *Illuminated Byzantine Gospel Book*, 10, fig. 7.

of [pagan] Greece deceived, and gave an evil veneration to the indecency of vain impieties. But the great and wise [emperor] Constantine brought [the sculptures] here to be a sport for the city, to be a plaything for children, and a source of laughter for men.”<sup>31</sup> This statement is a paraphrase of Eusebius’s attempt to explain why Constantine the Great had decorated his new foundation with pagan statues.<sup>32</sup> But, in the case of Constantine the Rhodian, one wonders if the *topos* in his *ekphrasis* is not inserted *pro forma*; certainly, his characterization of the pagan idols at the Senate House is in some respects more vivid than his following accounts of the Christian mosaics in the church of the Holy Apostles, many of which show less interest in colorful physical description than in theological commentary. Here, for example, is how Constantine begins his passage on the mosaic of the Annunciation: “The first miracle is that of Gabriel bringing to a virgin maiden [news of] the incarnation of the Logos and filling her with divine joy.”<sup>33</sup> Other feast scenes from the life of Christ are given an equally terse treatment: “The fifth is the Baptism received from the hands of John by the stream of the Jordan; the Father testifying to the Logos from above, and the spirit coming down in the guise of a bird, in the resplendent form of a dove.”<sup>34</sup> The juxtaposition of profane and sacred in the *ekphrasis* of Constantine the Rhodian certainly served to enhance the solemnity of the latter, but the strategy carried with it the danger of making the devil’s works more fascinating than the stereotyped sanctity of the familiar Christian images.

Later Byzantine authors penned equally vivid descriptions of the monstrous creations of pagan sculptors; now, however, the disclaimers are distinctly fainter. By way of

<sup>31</sup> Καὶ τοὺς Γίγαντας ὡς δράκοντας τοὺς πόδας  
κάτωθεν ἐνστρέφοντας ἐσπειρημένους,  
ρίπτουντας ὕψει τῶν πετρῶν ἀποσπάδας,  
καὶ τοὺς δράκοντας ὥσπερ ἐλλιχμωμένους,  
δεινὸν βρύχοντας, βλοσυρὸν δεδορκότας  
καὶ πῦρ ἀποστίλβοντας ἐκ τῶν ὀμμάτων,  
ὡς τοὺς ὀρώντας δειματοῦσθαι καὶ τρέμειν,  
φόβον τὲ φρικτὸν ἐμβαλεῖν τῇ καρδίᾳ.  
Τοίαις πλάναισιν Ἑλλάδος μωρὸν γένος  
ἐξηπατεῖτο καὶ σέβας κακὸν νέμεν  
τῇ τῶν ματαίων δυσσεβῶν βδελυρίᾳ,  
ἀλλ’ ὁ κράτιστος καὶ σοφὸς Κωνσταντῖνος  
ἤνεγκεν ὥδε παίγιον πέλειν πόλει,  
παισὶ τ’ ἄθυρμα καὶ γέλων τοῖς ἀνδράσιν.

Ed. E. Legrand, “Description des œuvres d’art et de l’église des Saints Apôtres de Constantinople,” *REG* 9 (1896): 40.139–52.

<sup>32</sup> *Vita Constantini* 3.54. See C. Mango, “Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder,” *DOP* 17 (1963): 56–57, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν γε θαῦμα, παρθένῳ κόρῃ  
τὸν Γαβριὴλ φέροντα σάρκωσιν Λόγου  
καὶ χαρμονῆς πληροῦντα ταύτην ἐνθέου . . .

Ed. Legrand, “Description des œuvres,” 58.751–53.

<sup>34</sup> Βάπτισμα πέμπτον χερσὶ προσδεγμένον  
ταῖς Ἰωάννου πρὸς ῥοαῖς Ἰορδάνου,  
πατρός τ’ ἄνωθεν μαρτυροῦντος τῷ λόγῳ  
καὶ Πνεύματος φοιτῶντος ὀρνέου δίκην  
περιστερᾶς εἰς εἶδος ἡγλαῖσμένον . . .

*Ibid.*, 59.792–60.796. The poet does, however, treat the Passion at more length, giving to the Virgin of the Crucifixion scene a moving lament; *ibid.*, 63.916–65.981.

example, one may cite Niketas Choniates praising the ancient statues of Constantinople that were destroyed by the crusaders in 1204. He calls the Latins barbarians and “haters of the beautiful,” for they did not allow “marvelous works of art to escape destruction.”<sup>35</sup> Among these marvelous works he describes a Nile hippocamp, with the front body of a horse joined to a scaly, spiny, tapering tail. He also describes sculptures of sphinxes, which he praises for their novelty—in other words, for the very qualities of innovation that church writers had condemned. He says that the sphinxes are “like comely women in the front, and like horrible beasts in their hind parts, moving on foot in a newly-invented manner, and nimbly borne aloft on their wings, rivalling the great winged birds.”<sup>36</sup>

The most explicit appreciation of novelty in the visual arts is to be found in the twelfth-century novel *Rodanthi and Dosiklis* by Theodore Prodromos. In a remarkable passage toward the end of the work, the author compares a fond embrace uniting the two lovers and their two fathers to certain textiles that he has seen: “I have often seen in many weavings . . . such a depiction by an innovative artist, the invention, that is to say, of the weaver’s art, one head dividing itself into a quartet of bodies, or a quartet of bodies as though joined together in a single head—a four-bodied animal, or conversely, a one-faced creation [made up of] four animals, both lion and lions. For the bodies of the beasts were displayed separately from the necks to the tails, but they all came together into the face of one lion.”<sup>37</sup>

What kind of weaving did Prodromos have in mind when he wrote this description? In my opinion, it was probably a western rather than a Byzantine textile, and specifically one from Venice. Although in Byzantine art of this period one can find examples of one-headed monsters with *two* bodies, there are very few with *four*.<sup>38</sup> Such a composition is, however, frequently found on sculptures in, or coming from, Venice; one example is the

<sup>35</sup> Ἄλλ’ οὐδὲ τῶν ἐν τῷ ἱππικῷ ἱσταμένων ἀγαλμάτων καὶ ἀλλοίων θαυμαστῶν ἔργων τὴν καταστροφὴν παρήκαν οἱ τοῦ καλοῦ ἀνέραστοι οὗτοι βάρβαροι. Ed. J. A. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* (Berlin, 1975), 649.79–81.

<sup>36</sup> Τὰς Σφίγγας ἐπὶ τούτοις, τὰς εὐειδεῖς ὡς γυναῖκας τὰ ἔμπροσθεν καὶ φρικτὰς ὡς θηρία τὰ ὀπισθεν, καινότερας δὲ ὡς καὶ πεζῇ βαινούσας καὶ κούφως τῷ πετρῷ φερομένας καὶ διαμιλλωμένας τοῖς τῶν ὀρνίθων μεγαλοπτέρυξι. *Ibid.*, 650.22–26.

<sup>37</sup> Εἶδον γὰρ πολλὰκις ἐν πολλοῖς πέπλοις . . .  
 τοιοῦτον εἰκόνισμα καινοῦ ζωγράφου,  
 ὑφαντικῆς εὐρημα δηλαδὴ τέχνης·  
 μίαν κεφαλὴν εἰς τετρακτὺν σωμάτων  
 διαιρεθεῖσαν, ἢ τετρακτὺν σωμάτων  
 οἷον συνιζηκυῖαν εἰς κάραν μίαν·  
 ζῶν τι τετράσωμον, ἢ τὸνναντίον  
 μονοπρόσωπον τεττάρων ζῶων πλάσιν,  
 λέοντα καὶ λέοντας· οἱ γὰρ ἀσύχενες  
 ἅπαν τὸ λοιπὸν σῶμα τῆς οὐράς μέχρι  
 τοὺς θῆρας ἐπλήθυνον τῇ διαστάσει·  
 τῷ δὲ προσώπῳ πάντες ἦσαν εἰς λέων.

*Rodanthi and Dosiklis*, 9.320–34; ed. F. Conca, *Il romanzo bizantino del XII secolo* (Turin, 1994), 294. See the discussion of this passage in R. Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance* (Cambridge, 1989), 65.

<sup>38</sup> A rare example of a one-headed, four-bodied lion is found in University Library, Turin, MS. C.I.6, fol. 77, where the animal forms the letter *chi*; a one-headed lion with two bodies forming the base of the letter *tau* is found on fol. 148v of the same manuscript. See J. C. Anderson, “The Illustration of Cod. Sinai. Gr. 339,” *ArtB* 61 (1979): fig. 19c, d.



marble roundel that is set into the north face of San Marco (Fig. 20).<sup>39</sup> There are also several similar paterae, all from the Veneto.<sup>40</sup> The ultimate source of the four-bodied, one-headed lion seems to have been northern Romanesque art of the type criticized by St. Bernard, such as an initial *Q* in a manuscript produced in the first half of the twelfth century in northern France, at St. Omer (Fig. 21).<sup>41</sup> Whatever the source of the textile seen by Prodhomos, however, one can note that the criteria by which he praised this composition, that is, innovation and invention, are precisely those that the official church doctrine condemned.

## II. MOVEMENT

My second, and shorter, section is devoted to movement.<sup>42</sup> By movement, I mean not the sacred movement—not, that is, the solemn processions of the liturgies, nor the decorous dances of the Hebrew women of the Old Testament, nor even the animation of holy witnesses, such as the apostles at the Ascension of Christ—but rather the unbridled gyrations of maenads and satyrs, the posturings of idols, and the ridiculous antics of actors. Here again, the profane aesthetic can be defined in negative terms, through its antithesis, namely, the ordered art and ceremony of church and palace. For example, in both ecclesiastical and political writing, an effective way of blackening an enemy was to make a *synkrisis*, or contrast, between the solemn movements of the Christian liturgy and the wild antics of one's opponent. Thus, in the Life of the emperor Basil, much of which was composed as an invective against his predecessor Michael III, Michael is presented as a drunkard and compared to Dionysos in his pursuit of "what was soft, loose, voluptuous, and without rigor or moral fiber."<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, his followers have been characterized as "unbridled satyrs, ready for all shameless conduct."<sup>44</sup> By way of example, we are told how Michael's protégé Gryllos staged a bogus procession in mockery of a liturgy conducted by the patriarch Ignatios. According to the text, the most holy Patriarch Ignatios, together with his whole ecclesiastical retinue, was processing to some church with the customary liturgy and chanting. Then they met with the emperor's impious pseudo-patriarch Gryllos, who had wrapped himself in priestly attire and was riding upon an ass, together with his own retinue of fake metropolitans. In scandalized tones, the text describes how this chorus of satyrs mocked the true patriarch's procession with an exaggerated theatrical parody, lifting up their church vestments and strumming on their stringed instruments, while singing obscene songs in competition with the chanting of

<sup>39</sup>Z. Świechowski and A. Rizzi, *Romanische Reliefs von venezianischen Fassaden* (Wiesbaden, 1982), 36, no. 6, pl. 3.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 51, no. 104, pl. 10; 161–62, no. 743, pl. 56; 188, no. 922, pl. 69. The same composition was also woven into Italian textiles; see A. Muthesius, *Studies in Byzantine and Islamic Silk Weaving* (London, 1995), 219, pl. 71 (Aachen Munster Treasury, silk twill of the 13th or 14th century).

<sup>41</sup>Boulogne-sur-Mer, Bibliothèque Municipale 36, fol. 124; Świechowski and Rizzi, *Romanische Reliefs*, 231, fig. 13.

<sup>42</sup>On this topic, see A. P. Kazhdan, "The Concept of Motion in the Vocabulary of the Byzantine Historian Nicetas Choniates" (in Russian), in *Odysseus, Man in History* (Moscow, 1994), 95–116.

<sup>43</sup>Πλὴν οὐ τὸ μειλίχιον μόνον καὶ λυαῖον καὶ τρυφηλὸν τε καὶ ἀνειμένον καὶ ἀπαλὸν καὶ παρακεκινηκὸς ἐκ τῆς μέθης ἐκέκτητο τοῦ χαριδότου Διονύσου, ὃν μμεῖσθαι ᾤετο καὶ ἐσπούδαζεν. *Vita Basilii* 26, PG 109: 268A.

<sup>44</sup>Σάτυροί τινες οὗτοι καὶ πρὸς πᾶσαν αἰσχροουργίαν ἀκόλαστοι. Theophanes Continuatus 4.38, PG 109:216A.

the genuine clergy, so that “leaping about like Pan and the satyrs, and beating their cymbals, and mocking the [true] priests and the archpriest as if they were their rivals in art, they accomplished their diabolic procession and dance.”<sup>45</sup>

Another story that involves mockery of the liturgy is told in the Life of Leo, Bishop of Catania, which was in circulation by the tenth century. Here the opponent of the saint, the pagan magician Heliodoros, is trying to subvert the liturgy performed by the bishop on a feast day. We are told that Heliodoros came into the church together with a crowd of believers as if he were a pious Christian, but, once inside, he began to leap about in a disorderly manner, playfully jumping upon people and imitating the kicking of mules. The congregation, says the text, were by turns moved to laughter and vexed at his disgraceful nonsense and blasphemy.<sup>46</sup>

The same antithesis—of rivals in art, of order and unrestrained movement—can be observed in the carvings on the tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine ivory and bone boxes. One can contrast the severe posing of the saints on a tenth-century casket at Dumbarton Oaks (Fig. 22)<sup>47</sup> with another box in St. Petersburg (Fig. 23).<sup>48</sup> On the second casket, the main point of the imagery seems to be motion rather than the reproduction of particular pagan myths. While it is certainly true that Byzantine religious art is not entirely devoid of motion, there is no doubt that the pursuit of movement and of contortion for its own sake is taken much further in these secular carvings than in any examples of church art.

Some examples of carved plaques from other secular caskets, such as a box in the Museo Nazionale of Florence, show how the artists went out of their way to portray figures in motion, whether seen from the front, from the back, or upside down (Fig. 24, at the top).<sup>49</sup> Much of this repertoire of moving figures was drawn from Dionysiac imagery; the god himself can be seen on the Veroli casket in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Fig. 25),<sup>50</sup> while his cavorting maenads appear, for example, in a panel from a box in the Archaeological Museum at Pula (Fig. 26).<sup>51</sup> On a plaque in the Victoria and Albert Museum, one even finds a drunken Herakles who has to be supported, which is a reference to the drinking contest between Herakles and Dionysos (Fig. 27).<sup>52</sup> Centaurs

<sup>45</sup> Καὶ Πανικῶς τε καὶ Σατιρικῶς σκιρτῶντες, καὶ κυμαλίζοντες, καὶ ὡς ἀντιτέχνους τοὺς ἱερεῖς καὶ τὸν ἀρχιερέα μυκτηρίσαντες, τὴν διαβολικὴν χορείαν καὶ πορείαν διήνουν. *Vita Basilii* 22, PG 109:260D–61A. On this passage, see F. Tinnefeld, “Zum profanen Mimos in Byzanz nach dem Verdikt des Trullanums (691),” *Byzantina* 6 (1974): 323–43, esp. 330–33; Cutler, “On Byzantine Boxes,” esp. 45; Ja. N. Ljubarskij, “Der Kaiser als Mime,” *JÖB* 37 (1987): 39–50; and K. Corrigan, “The Jewish Satyr’ in the 9th-Century Byzantine Psalters,” in *Hellenic and Jewish Arts: Interaction, Tradition and Renewal*, ed. A. Ovadia (Tel Aviv, 1998), 351–68, esp. 357–58. On the characterizations of Basil and Michael in the *Vita Basilii*, see also P. Agapitos, “Ἡ εἰκόνα τοῦ αὐτοκράτορα Βασιλείου Α’ στὴ φιλομακεδονικὴ γραμματεία, 867–959,” *Hellenika* 40 (1989): 285–322.

<sup>46</sup> Ed. V. V. Latyshev, *Neizdannye grecheskie agiograficheskie teksty* (St. Petersburg, 1914), 25.1–7.

<sup>47</sup> Weitzmann, *Ivories and Steatites*, 73–77, no. 30, pls. 44–49.

<sup>48</sup> Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1:42–43, no. 51, pl. 32.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:37–38, no. 33, pl. 20b.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:30–32, no. 21, pl. 10e; Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology*, 180, fig. 229.

<sup>51</sup> Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1:34–35, no. 28, pl. 15b; Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology*, 180, fig. 231.

<sup>52</sup> Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1:29, no. 16, pl. 7; Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology*, 163, fig. 199.

also appear in a variety of strange and undignified positions, as illustrated by another plaque from the box in Florence (Fig. 28).<sup>53</sup>

A similar kind of aesthetic, celebrating movement and *joie de vivre*, was found in other media of Byzantine art. Recently Jeffrey Anderson and Michael Jeffreys have published a mid-twelfth-century description of a tent that was evidently embroidered with subjects very similar to those appearing on the caskets (compare with the lid of a casket in the Louvre, Fig. 29).<sup>54</sup> The *ekphrasis* appears in a poem by Manganeios Prodromos; the tent was owned by his patron, the *sebastokratorissa* Irene. The verses read, in part:

My lady, muse of muses, akropolis of beauty,  
the porch of your tent is filled with delights.  
Cupids are plucking strings and quietly strumming the cithara,  
satyrs seem to play, the centaurs gambol,  
the muses join in the dance, the nereids are leaping.<sup>55</sup>

As in the case of the invented creatures, these images celebrating frivolity and freedom of movement, with their strong Dionysiac and erotic overtones, were subversive in character. They opposed the ideals of decorum upheld by both ecclesiastical and imperial protocol. Ecclesiastical opposition to this kind of subject appears most clearly in the proscriptions of the canonists, who forbade not only the depiction of profane imagery in art, but also its performance in the theater, where the antics of mimes and buffoons were singled out for special criticism. I will cite two passages from the twelfth-century commentaries as examples. Balsamon wrote as follows on the hundredth canon of the Council in Trullo: "Since certain erotomaniacs . . . depicted in paintings, on walls, or elsewhere, erotes or other kinds of abominations, in order to sate their carnal desires by looking at them, the holy fathers . . . decreed that such things should cease completely, because they bewitch and deceive the sight, and . . . corrupt what is in the image of God."<sup>56</sup> As for theatrical performances, the official view is exemplified by the following commentary of Zonaras on the fifty-first canon of the Council in Trullo:

Correct Christian discipline requires the faithful not to indulge in loose and dissolute living, but to live in a manner that befits the saints. Therefore, this canon forbade whatever gives unnecessary merriment to the soul or weakens and enfeebles its [moral] fibers, and whatever causes shaking with laughter and loud guffaws. Of this kind are the actions

<sup>53</sup> Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1:37–38, no. 33, pl. 20c; Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology*, 167, fig. 210.

<sup>54</sup> Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1:33–34, no. 26, pl. 11a, e.

<sup>55</sup> Δέσποινα, μούσα τῶν μουσῶν, ἀκρόπολις τοῦ κάλλους,  
τὰ πρόθυρά σου τῆς σκηνῆς πεπλήρωνται χαρίτων.  
Ἔρωτες πλήττουσιν χορδὰς, σιγῇ κιθαρωδοῦσιν,  
δοκοῦσι παίζειν σάτυροι, σκιρτῶσιν ἵπποκράται,  
αἱ μούσαι συγχορεύουσι, πηδῶσι νηρήιδες.

Ed. and trans. J. C. Anderson and M. J. Jeffreys, "The Decoration of the Sebastokratorissa's Tent," *Byzantion* 64 (1994): 8–18, esp. 11.1–5.

<sup>56</sup> Ἐπεὶ τοίνυν τινὲς ἐρωτομανοῦντες . . . ἐν πίναξιν, ἢ ἐν τείχοις, ἢ ἐν ἄλλοις τισὶν εἵδεσιν εἰκόνιζον ἐρωτίδια, ἢ καὶ τινα μυσαρά, ὅπως τὰς σαρκικὰς αὐτῶν ἐπιθυμίας διὰ τῆς πρὸς ταῦτα ὀράσεως ἐκπεραίνωσιν, ὥρισαν οἱ ἅγιοι Πατέρες, χρῆσάμενοι καὶ μαρτυρίαις γραφικαῖς, σχολάσαι ταῦτα παντάπασι, ὡς καταγοητεύοντα ἦτοι ἀπατάμενα τὴν ὄρασιν, . . . καὶ παραίτια ὄντα αἰσχροῦ καὶ ἀσέμνων τολμημάτων, καὶ διαφθειρόντων τὸ κατ' εἰκόνα θεοῦ. PG 137:861c. See H. Saradi, *Aspects of the Classical Tradition in Byzantium* (Toronto, 1995), 31.

of the mimes . . . who incite unseemly laughter with slaps to the temples and loud noises, and who, as it were, incite their more simple-minded and heedless [spectators] to Bacchic frenzy.<sup>57</sup>

Cupids, slapstick, immoderate merriment, Bacchic frenzy<sup>58</sup>—all this was to be avoided by Christians. And yet, obviously, they liked it. Again, it is in the secular romances that we find a frank appreciation of unrestrained dancing and drunken merrymaking, as is demonstrated, once more, by Prodrōmos's *Rodanthi and Dosiklis*. In book two, there is a description of a party given in the garden of a house in the town of Rhodes, at which one of the diners, Nausikrates, “rose from his cups, and began to dance a sailor’s dance.” The narrator, Dosiklis, describes how the other guests admired the movements of the dance, whereas he had eyes only for Rodanthi: “For the others, the contortions and twistings of Nausikrates were even more delightful than the melody; they were rustic, . . . but not without grace and comic effect—but for me, [only] Rodanthi’s complexion was beautiful.”<sup>59</sup> More remarkable still is a farcical passage in the *Drosilla and Chariklis* by Niketas Eugenianos, which describes how the drunken old woman Baryllis, picking up a hand towel, attempted to execute a Bacchic dance, but in her twistings and turnings tripped herself up on her own legs, fell, and landed upside down on her head, to the accompaniment of loud farts—all of which caused much laughter among her spectators (compare Fig. 24, top right).<sup>60</sup>

### III. NUDITY

The third and last aspect of the profane aesthetic to be considered here is nudity. Today the nude is more often associated with Renaissance and post-Renaissance art rather than with Byzantine art. Nevertheless, the Byzantines appreciated nudity in art more than might be supposed, even though the connotations that they gave to it were quite different from those applied in the Renaissance.

In the official Byzantine view, nudity in art was condemned unless it served a clearly Christian purpose, such as portraying the nakedness of Adam and Eve before the Fall,

<sup>57</sup>Τοὺς πιστοὺς ἡ ἀκρίβεια τῆς εὐαγγελικῆς πολιτείας μὴ ἀνειμένως καὶ διακεχυμένως βιοῦν βούλεται, ἀλλ’ ὡς πρέπει ἁγίοις. Διὰ τοῦτο οὖν ὁ κανὼν οὗτος ὅσα διάχυσιν τῇ ψυχῇ ἐμποιοῦσι παρὰ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, ἐκλύουσιν τε καὶ χαυνοῦσι τὸν τόνον αὐτῆς, καὶ πρὸς γέλωτας βρασματώδεις παρακινοῦσι καὶ καγχασμούς, ἀπηγόρευσεν, οἷά εἰσι τὰ τῶν μίμων . . . ἐνίοτε δ’ ἕτερ’ ἅττα τοῖς ἐπὶ κόρῃς ῥάπισμασι καὶ ψοφήμασι, γέλωτας ἀπρεπεῖς κινοῦσι, καὶ οἷον ἐκβακχεύουσι τοὺς ἀφελεστεροὺς ἢ ἀπροσεκτοτέροισι. PG 137:693B–C. See Tinnefeld, “Zum profanen Mimos in Byzanz,” 337–38.

<sup>58</sup>Bacchic frenzy, as an image of disorder, was also applied to heretics. See, for example, Photius’s description of the iconoclasts as “bacchantes and harpies of the heresies and schisms,” who filled their followers with “corybantic frenzy”: B. Laourdas, *Photiou homiliai* (Thessalonike, 1959), 176.10–14; C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 310.

<sup>59</sup>Ἄλλοις ἐραστὸν τῆς μελωδίας πλεόν  
τὸ στρέμμα καὶ λύγισμα τοῦ Ναυσικράτους,  
ἀγροικικὸν μὲν (τί γὰρ ἡ Ναυσικράτους;),  
οὐ μὴν γελῶτων ἐνδεῆς καὶ χαρίτων·  
ἐμοὶ δὲ καλὴ τῆς Ῥοδάνθης ἡ χροῶ.

*Rodanthi and Dosiklis*, 2:115–19; ed. Conca, *Il romanzo bizantino*, 96.

<sup>60</sup>*Drosilla and Chariklis*, 7:272–89; ed. Conca, *Il romanzo bizantino*, 460. I owe the reference to the kindness of Panagiotis Agapitos. On this passage, see Beaton, *Medieval Greek Romance*, 75; A. Giusti, “Nota a Niceta Eugenio (*Dros. et Char.* 7:247–332),” *Studi italiani di filologia classica*, 3d. ser. 11 (1993): 216–23.

the human nature of Christ at his Baptism and Crucifixion,<sup>61</sup> or the self-deprivation of certain ascetic saints.<sup>62</sup> Otherwise, nude images were associated with paganism. Older accounts of Christian victories over idols often stressed their shameful nakedness. For example, the Life of Bishop Porphyrios of Gaza by Mark the Deacon tells us of a statue of Aphrodite that stood upon an altar in the city of Gaza, and which represented a naked woman, who, in the author's words, "allowed all of her shameful parts to be seen." The statue was particularly pernicious, because she was venerated by the women of the city, who hoped to receive from Aphrodite dreams giving advice concerning their matrimonial prospects; but the demon's advice was bad, and the resulting marriages frequently ended in divorce.<sup>63</sup>

Even Niketas Choniates, who wrote the lament on the statues of Constantinople destroyed by the crusaders, elsewhere praised the bronze of Athena that stood in the Forum of Constantine because the goddess was fully dressed. Her bronze garment covered her completely, "so that no part of the body which Nature has ordained to be clothed should be exposed."<sup>64</sup>

However, there was another viewpoint. One can see this in a curious piece, an *ethopoiia*, or character study, written around 1178 by Eustathios, shortly to become Archbishop of Thessalonike. The *ethopoiia* is entitled "What the monk Neophytos of Mokissos might have said when, on the day after the death of his patron, the patriarch Michael III, who had done many good things for him, he was robbed of his outer garment and the rest of his clothes at the baths at the instigation of the Megas Oikonomos Pantechnes, the stolen garments then being given as a joke to the poor."<sup>65</sup> The text is basically a long lament of the now naked monk, beginning with an inventory of what he had lost and continuing with a graphic description of his present predicament. At one point during his speech, the robbed man refers to art. "Painters," he says, "portray the [three] graces naked; and they do this for the sake of symbolism. But nudity does not seem graceful to us, only disgraceful."<sup>66</sup> But if nakedness was disgraceful, it was also funny, as the poor man's complaints make clear. He describes the crowd that gathers to mock him:

<sup>61</sup>On Christ shown naked in Crucifixion scenes, see A. P. Kazhdan and H. Maguire, "Byzantine Hagio-graphical Texts as Sources on Art," *DOP* 45 (1991): 1–22, esp. 10–11. See also A. Cutler and A. P. Kazhdan, "The Nude," *ODB* 3:1500–1501.

<sup>62</sup>See the poems of Manuel Philes devoted to the nakedness of St. Onouphrios, cited by Alice-Mary Talbot in this volume.

<sup>63</sup>Ed. H. Grégoire and M.-A. Kugener, *Marc le Diacre, Vie de Porphyre, Évêque de Gaza* (Paris, 1930), 47–48, par. 59.

<sup>64</sup>Ὡς μή τι τοῦ σώματος παραφαίνοιτο, ὅπερ ἡ φύσις περιστέλλειν ἐπέταξε. Ed. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, 558.53–55.

<sup>65</sup>Ποίους ἂν εἶπε λόγους ὁ μοναχὸς Νεόφυτος ὁ Μωκησοῦ, ὅτε τῇ ἐπαύριον μετὰ θάνατον τοῦ πολλὰ εὐεργετήσαντος αὐτὸν ἁγιωτάτου πατριάρχου κυρίου Μιχαήλ, τοῦ τοῦ Ἀρχιεπισκόπου, λουόμενος ἀφῆρέθη ἐξ ἀποστολῆς τοῦ μεγάλου οἰκονόμου τοῦ παντεχνῆ τὸ ἔξω στρώμα καὶ τὰ ἱμάτια καὶ λοιπά, τὰ ἀστειῶς αὐτίκα δοθέντα πτωχοῖς. Ed. T. L. F. Tafel, *Eustathii Metropolitae Thessalonicensis Opuscula* (Frankfurt, 1832; repr. Amsterdam, 1964), 328.58–66, with emendations by P. Wirth, "Gehört die Ethopoiie Ποίους ἂν εἶπε λόγους κτλ. zum Briefcorpus des Erzbischofs Eustathios von Thessalonike?" *Classica et Mediaevalia* 21 (1960): 215–17, esp. 216. The piece is discussed by A. P. Kazhdan, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1984), 127–28, 187.

<sup>66</sup>Γυμνὰς οἱ ζωγραφοῦντες τὰς Χάριτας γράφουσι· καὶ τοῦτο αὐταῖς συμβολικὸν παράσημον. Ἄλλ' ἡμῖν οὐκ ἐπίχαρις ἡ γυμνότης, ἀλλ' ἔξω χάριτος. Ed. Tafel, *Eustathii Opuscula*, 330.46–48, with emendation from Wirth, "Gehört die Ethopoiie," 217.

Surely, I have become a laughing stock, and have become a performer in a trial of unseemly nakedness. . . . Now the great crowd of bathers is leaving the baths, having heaped up their laughter. And so the evil that has befallen me will be heralded and spread everywhere by rumor. And these thousands of people at the baths talk about me and look me up and down, on this side and on that side . . . their faces appear amazed, their eyes stare down, and they look as if they are seeing some monster. The bath keeper's pay has increased alright, but as for me, I am paraded about with a full escort, mocked for my unseemly condition, and made a show of.<sup>67</sup>

Thus the naked man compares himself to a monster and an object of ridicule. He has become a sideshow in the theater, like the bear led on a leash on an eleventh- or twelfth-century relief discovered at Constantinople (Fig. 30), or the plainly nude kynokephalos depicted on the relief's other face (Fig. 31).<sup>68</sup> Since this kynokephalos is armed with a shield, he is of the aggressive variety that, according to the *Alexander Romance*, attacked Alexander the Great when he reached their territory.<sup>69</sup> Apart from the fact that they had dogs' heads, another strange feature of the kynokephaloi, recorded in some Byzantine sources, was that they wore no clothes.<sup>70</sup> Thus, we have here a multiple freak—dog-headed, naked, and armed.

It must have been in such sense, as freaks, that the Byzantines understood the nude fighters who disported themselves on the rosette caskets, beside the composite beasts and other monsters. As Anthony Cutler has observed,<sup>71</sup> the pot-bellied warriors striding with their weapons into battle were surely intended to be ridiculous. One such fighter is found on a box in the collection at Dumbarton Oaks (Fig. 32);<sup>72</sup> another one, who sticks out his bottom, is from a casket in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 33).<sup>73</sup>

Similar naked warriors appear on Byzantine pottery, where they must also have been intended to be humorous. A twelfth-century bowl, excavated at Thebes (Fig. 34), is a parody of the common image of the heroic dragon slayer, such as appeared, for example, in a fragmentary bowl found at the Athenian agora (Fig. 35). The latter sherd also dates to the twelfth, or possibly the early thirteenth, century; it is well known because it probably represents Digenes Akritas, who shot his dragon through the neck with five darts or arrows, a feat that is referred to in some of the Akritic Songs.<sup>74</sup> Digenes is appropriately

<sup>67</sup>Οὐκοῦν θέατρον γινόμεθα ἐπὶ γέλωτι, καὶ γυμνικὸν οἶον ἄθλον τοῦτον ἀσχημοσύνης ἀνύομεν . . . Ὅχλος οἱ λουόμενοι καὶ οἱ πλείους ἀπέρχονται, γέλωτα συμφορησάμενοι· καὶ τὸ εἰς ἐμὲ κακὸν οὕτω κηρύσσεται, καὶ τῇ φήμῃ πανταχοῦ σκίδνεται· καὶ λουτροῦ πρόσφασιν δῆμος οὗτος μυρίος ὅσος περὶ ἐμέ, καὶ περιεργάζονται τὰ ἄνω, τὰ κάτω, τὰ ἐκ δεξιῶν, τὰ εὐώνυμα. . . . τὸ πρόσωπον εἰς ἐκπληξιν ἐσχημάτισται· ὑποβάλλονται οἱ ὀφθαλμοί, καὶ διάκεινται ὥσεί καὶ τι τέρας βλέπουσι. Καὶ τῷ μὲν βαλανεῖ πληθύνεται ὁ μισθός, ἐμοῦ δὲ πλήθων κατάγεται θρίαμβος, καὶ εἰς ἀχαριστίαν σκωπτόμενος θεατρίζομαι. Ed. Tafel, *Eustathii Opuscula*, 329.87–88, 331.30–42.

<sup>68</sup>Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines*, 2:39, no. 7, pl. 3; N. Firatlı, *La sculpture byzantine figurée au Musée Archéologique d'Istanbul* (Paris, 1990), 161–62, no. 320, pl. 98.

<sup>69</sup>*Alexander Romance*, 2:34–35 (text C); G. Bounoure and B. Serret, *Pseudo-Callisthène, Le Roman d'Alexandre* (Paris, 1992), 191.

<sup>70</sup>See the Vita of Makarios of Rome, ed. A. Vassiliev, *Anecdota graeco-byzantina* (Moscow, 1893), 139.

<sup>71</sup>Cutler, "On Byzantine Boxes," esp. 45.

<sup>72</sup>Weitzmann, *Ivories and Steatites*, 51–52, no. 23, pl. 29c.

<sup>73</sup>Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 1:28, no. 12, pl. 6b; Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology*, 182, fig. 243.

<sup>74</sup>M. A. Frantz, "Digenis Akritas: A Byzantine Epic and Its Illustrations," *Byzantion* 15 (1940–41): 87–91, fig. 1; eadem, "Akritas and the Dragons," *Hesperia* 10.1 (1941): 9–13, fig. 1.

dressed for the task, in armor. But the hero on the bowl from Thebes accomplishes his feat in the nude, and this surely must be a Byzantine joke.<sup>75</sup>

As in the case of the invented beasts, nudity made its way into church art as well as into the art of the home. I do not speak here of the Christian subjects; rather, I am referring to the decoration of churches with frankly pagan reliefs depicting naked figures, such as those found on the north wall of the Little Metropolis church in Athens (Fig. 36).<sup>76</sup> One also discovers initials in manuscripts portraying naked acrobats, as can be seen in an eleventh-century copy of the sermons of St. Gregory of Nazianzos, now in Turin. Here two nude men make up the letter *tau* (Fig. 37),<sup>77</sup> while in another vignette, somewhat reminiscent of the carvings on the secular boxes, a running naked boy clashes a pair of cymbals at the same time as he tramples a snake (Fig. 38).<sup>78</sup> In such images one sees how the Byzantine taste for the profane literally rubs against the prescriptions of the church fathers.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing pages some of the principal characteristics of profane art in Byzantium have been discussed. This art depicted creatures that were monstrous and unnatural in form, contorted in pose, and indecent in attire. Its attributes of recombination, movement, and nudity were not in themselves good or bad, since they appeared in some Christian contexts as well; but they acquired negative connotations when applied to forbidden subject matter. Moreover, these features were certainly accentuated and exaggerated in the profane context: composite creatures were more frequent, movement more contorted and extreme, and nakedness more explicit (see, especially, Figs. 5, 7, 10, 23, 24, and 31).<sup>79</sup>

Profane imagery was a source of both fascination and amusement. It could be found not only in ancient pagan art, as one might expect, but in medieval productions also. Whether it was the snake-legged giants on the doors of the Senate House, the statue of the *tauroleon* thrown off the column by St. Alypius, the drunken dance described by Prodromos, or the naked man who lost his clothes—all these forms were presented as both monstrous and ludicrous. It is true that it was a *topos* to say that pagan idols were the objects of ridicule; but a repeated *topos* is not a lie. In the Middle Ages, the Byzantines really did find pagan art to be funny, as well as sinister. It was outlandish, in the same manner as were the inventions produced by medieval artists. It is for this reason that one finds, for example, the seemingly strange juxtaposition of forms on the church of the Little Metropolis in Athens, where there are both ancient reliefs portraying naked figures

<sup>75</sup>See E. Dauterman Maguire, "Ceramic Arts of Everyday Life," in Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium* (as in note 24), 256–57. For other examples of ceramic bowls with clothed dragon slayers, see Frantz, "Digenis Akritas," figs. 2 (Corinth), 3 (Athenian agora), and 5 (Corinth); Morgan, *Byzantine Pottery*, 153, 315, no. 1502, fig. 131; 319, no. 1532, pl. 49a; 163, 333, no. 1681, fig. 141.

<sup>76</sup>K. Michel and A. Struck, "Die mittelbyzantinischen Kirchen Athens," *AM* 31 (1906): 279–324, esp. 308, 334–35, no. 87, fig. 22.

<sup>77</sup>Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, University Library C.I.6, Turin. See A. Grabar, "Une pyxide en ivoire à Dumbarton Oaks," *DOP* 14 (1960): 123–46, esp. 143–44, pl. 35c; G. Galavaris, *The Illustrations of the Liturgical Homilies of Gregory Nazianzenus* (Princeton, N.J., 1969), 259–60.

<sup>78</sup>Galavaris, *Liturgical Homilies*, pl. 9, fig. 50.

<sup>79</sup>Cutler, "On Byzantine Boxes," esp. 46.

from pagan mythology and medieval reliefs showing composite creatures. To us these works come from different worlds, the classical and the medieval, but to the Byzantines they were from the same world of profane art. Nor did the Byzantines make a rigid division between secular art and the art of churches; the profane imagery appears in both places. This fact was noted by Niketas Stethatos, in his eleventh-century *Life of Symeon the Theologian*: "One can see scenes of the theater depicted in some of the churches and on the holy veils for the sake of adornment, I mean images of wrestling, of hunting, and of dancing, and different varieties of dogs and monkeys and creatures that walk and fly . . . these things are considered to be a delight and an adornment."<sup>80</sup> Even though he was quoting from an earlier iconodule polemic, we have seen that he spoke the truth.

Although Byzantine attitudes toward profane art remained much the same from the tenth to the twelfth century, the Byzantines tended to express their appreciation of it more frankly toward the end of the period. In the tenth century the appreciation, though certainly there, was more veiled, with stronger disclaimers. And here it is important to make a distinction between appreciation and admiration. The Byzantines of our period *liked* this art, because it was funny, freakish, and titillating—and they needed to laugh, because their saints could never laugh but only smiled.<sup>81</sup> But the Byzantines did not yet *admire* profane art. I know of nothing written between the tenth and the twelfth century that matches the attitude of Manuel Chrysoloras, a protohumanist of the early fifteenth century who revered ancient sculpture for its ennobling qualities, saying that the beauties of the bodies depicted there reflected the mind of the supreme Creator himself.<sup>82</sup>

We have seen that the repertoire of invented creatures in Byzantine art was relatively restricted; it was certainly much smaller than in Western medieval art.<sup>83</sup> To a large extent, Byzantine artists confined themselves to portraying the very composites inherited from pagan antiquity that their church authorities had condemned, such as centaurs, sphinxes, sirens, and satyrs.<sup>84</sup> Only occasionally does one find an import, such as the winged lion with a peacock's tail (derived from Persia) or the four-bodied lion described by Pro-dromos (which was probably Western). Thus, in Byzantium even the opposition to authority had prescribed forms. Profane art was regimented in an inverse way; even when the Byzantines were disobeying, their imaginations could not escape the discipline of their church.

Finally, the profane art of Byzantium illustrates the value of *synkrisis*, or comparison.

<sup>80</sup>Καὶ τὰ μὲν τῆς σκηνῆς ὡς ἐν τισὶ τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν καὶ ἱερῶν καταπετασμάτων καλλωπισμοῦ ἔνεκα γράφεται, παλαιστραὶ φημι καὶ κυνηγέσια καὶ ὀρχήστραι, κυνῶν δὲ γένη καὶ πιθήκων καὶ ἐρπετῶν θηρίων τε καὶ πετεινῶν . . . , τέρψις ἐλογίσθη καὶ κόσμος αὐτοῖς. Ed. I. Hausherr and G. Horn, "Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949–1022) par Nicéas Stéthatos," *OCA* 12 (Rome, 1928): 128.12–16.

<sup>81</sup>On the Byzantine sense of humor, see L. Garland, "'And His Bald Head Shone Like a Full Moon . . .': An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Recorded in Historical Sources of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Parergon* 8 (1990): 1–31.

<sup>82</sup>Letter addressed to Demetrius Chrysoloras, PG 156: 57C–60B. See Saradi-Mendelovici, "Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments," 59.

<sup>83</sup>On the Western repertoire, see the classic study by J. Baltrušaitis, *Le moyen âge fantastique* (Paris, 1955). For a more recent treatment, see M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992).

<sup>84</sup>Compare the observations by Jacques Le Goff on the medieval West: "It is not farfetched to say that the marvelous was one form of resistance to the official ideology of Christianity"; *The Medieval Imagination* (Chicago, 1985), 32. I thank Helen Saradi for this reference.



The profane motifs on the outside of the churches, or in the margins of the sacred texts, made what was inside more holy by contrast. Just as the stereotyped piety of Leo of Catania was enhanced by the demonic antics of Heliodoros, so too the disorder of the reliefs on the outside of a church enhanced the good order of the images inside, which adhered strictly to the rules.<sup>85</sup> In Byzantium official art and profane art were mutually reinforcing; it is impossible to cut the one from the other.

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<sup>85</sup>In later Byzantine art, especially during the Palaiologan period, profane motifs began to invade the margins of the christological scenes themselves, such as the Baptism (nude bathers, sea monsters), but the aesthetic effect remained the same—namely, the solemnity of the sacred figures at the center of the composition was enhanced. See G. Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'évangile* (Paris, 1960), 170–215; D. Mouriki, "Revival Themes with Elements of Daily Life in Two Palaeologan Frescoes Depicting the Baptism," in *Okeanos: Essays Presented to Ihor Ševčenko*, eds. C. Mango and O. Pritsak (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 458–88. So, also, the serenity of Christ was contrasted with those who mocked him; see, for example, A. Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy* (Cambridge, 1996), esp. 99–107, fig. 62 (Staro Nagoričino).